

Elisabeth Rethberg

the
HMV,
Parlophone,
and Victor
recordings
(1927~34)



CD I (79:19)

- | | | |
|---|---|------|
| 1 | TANNHÄUSER: Dich teure Halle (Wagner) <i>Ger.</i>
xi 1927; CWR 1329-2 (HMV D 1420) | 3:17 |
| 2 | LOHENGRIN: Einsam in trüben Tagen (Wagner) <i>Ger.</i>
xi 1927; CWR 1330-2 (HMV D 1420) | 4:13 |
| 3 | AIDA: Ritorna vincitor (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
xi 1927; CWR 1331-2 (HMV D 1451) | 4:17 |
| AIDA: Nile Scene (Act III) (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
with Giacomo Lauri-Volpi, <i>tenor</i> , and Giuseppe de Luca, <i>baritone</i> | | |
| 4 | O patria mia
xi 1927; CWR 1332-2 (HMV D 1451) | 3:43 |
| 5 | Ciel! mio padre!
20 i 1930; CVE 58610-1 (Victor 8207) | 4:19 |
| 6 | Su, dunque! sorgete egizie coorti!
20 i 1930; CVE 58611-1 (Victor 8207) | 3:51 |
| 7 | Pur ti riveggo
I ii 1930; CVE 49707-2 (Victor 8160) | 3:26 |
| 8 | Là tra foreste vergini
I ii 1930; CVE 49708-2 (Victor 8160) | 3:44 |
| 9 | Ah, no! fuggiamo!
I ii 1930; CVE 49709-2 (Victor 8206) | 2:20 |
| 10 | Ma, dimmi: per qual via eviterem le schiere degli armati?
20 i 1930; CVE 58609-1 (Victor 8206) | 3:22 |
| 11 | IL RE PASTORE: L'amerò sarò costante (Mozart) <i>It.</i>
with Yacob Zayde, <i>violinist</i>
29 xii 1930; CVE 58139-4 (Victor 7472) | 4:28 |
| 12 | DON GIOVANNI: Batti, batti (Mozart) <i>It.</i>
29 xii 1930; CVE 67742-2 (Victor 7472) | 3:42 |
| 13 | FAUST: Il était un roi de Thulé (Gounod) <i>Fr.</i>
10 xii 1929; CVE 57592-2 (Victor 7179) | 3:52 |

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| 14 | FAUST: Ah! Je ris de me voir si belle 'Air des bijoux' (Gounod) <i>Fr.</i>
10 xii 1929; CVE 57593-2 (Victor 7179) | 3:35 |
| 15 | UN BALLO IN MASCHERA: Ma dall'arido stelo (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
23 xii 1929; CVE 58138-2 (Victor 7582) | 4:34 |
| 16 | UN BALLO IN MASCHERA: Morrò, ma prima in grazia (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
30 i 1930; CVE 58630-I (Victor 7582) | 4:28 |
| 17 | OTELLO: Piangea cantando nell'erma landa 'Willow Song' (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
29 xii 1930; CVE 67743-2 (Victor 7393) | 4:25 |
| 18 | OTELLO: Ave Maria (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
29 i 1930; CVE 58628-I (Victor 7393) | 4:09 |
| 19 | I LOMBARDI: Qual voluttà trascorrere (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
with Beniamino Gigli, <i>tenor</i> , and Ezio Pinza, <i>bass</i>
31 xii 1930; CVE 67748-I (previously unpublished) | 4:15 |
| 20 | I LOMBARDI: Qual voluttà trascorrere (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
with Beniamino Gigli, <i>tenor</i> , and Ezio Pinza, <i>bass</i>
31 xii 1930; CVE 67748-2 (Victor 8194) | 4:15 |

CD 2 (75:56)

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|---|---|------|
| 1 | ATTILA: Te sol quest'amina (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
with Beniamino Gigli, <i>tenor</i> , and Ezio Pinza, <i>bass</i>
31 xii 1930; CVE 67749-I (previously unpublished) | 3:08 |
| 2 | ATTILA: Te sol quest'amina (Verdi) <i>It.</i>
with Beniamino Gigli, <i>tenor</i> , and Ezio Pinza, <i>bass</i>
31 xii 1930; CVE 67749-2 (Victor 6494) | 3:00 |
| 3 | DER MEISTERSINGER: Sieh, Ev'chen (Wagner) <i>Ger.</i>
with Friedrich Schorr, <i>bass</i>
30 xii 1929; CVE 58145-2 (Victor 8195) | 4:27 |

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| 4 | DER MEISTERSINGER: Hat man mit dem Schuhwerk (Wagner) <i>Ger.</i>
with Friedrich Schorr, <i>bass</i>
30 xii 1929; CVE 58146-2 (Victor 8195) | 4:24 |
| 5 | DER FLIEGENDE HOLLÄNDER: Johohoe! Traft ihr das Schiff (Wagner) <i>Ger.</i>
30 i 1930; CVE 58631-2 & 58632-1 (Victor 1477) | 6:08 |
| 6 | BOCCACCIO: Hab'ich nur deine Liebe (von Suppé) <i>Ger.</i>
30 iv 1931; CVE 53074-1 (Victor 7415) | 4:10 |
| 7 | DIE FLEDERMAUS: Klänge der Heimat 'Csardas' (Strauss II) <i>Ger.</i>
30 iv 1931; CVE 53075-1 (Victor 7415) | 4:15 |
| 8 | LE NOZZE DI FIGARO: Heil'ge Quelle (Mozart) <i>Ger.</i>
21 v 1930; BE 9005 (Parlophone RO 20115) | 3:09 |
| 9 | DER ZIGEUNERBARON: So elend und so treu (Strauss II) <i>Ger.</i>
21 v 1930; BE 9004 (Parlophone RO 20115) | 2:34 |
| 10 | CARMEN: Ich sprach, dass ich furchtlos mich fühle 'Micaëla'a Air' (Bizet) <i>Ger.</i>
21 v 1930; XXB 8486 (Parlophone R 20123) | 3:50 |
| 11 | L'AFRICAINNE: Leb'wohl, freundlich Gestade (Meyerbeer) <i>Ger.</i>
iv/ v 1933; Be 10391 (Parlophone RO 20307) | 3:08 |
| 12 | MADAMA BUTTERFLY: Eines Tages sehen wir (Puccini) <i>Ger.</i>
21 v 1930; XXB 8487 (Parlophone R 20123) | 3:38 |
| 13 | CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA: Voi lo sapete (Mascagni) <i>It.</i>
iv/ v 1933; Qu 558 (Parlophone RO 20307) | 3:08 |
| 14 | Wohl kenn'ich Euren Stand (Wolf) <i>Ger.</i> | 1:31 |
| 15 | Man sagt mir (Wolf) <i>Ger.</i> | :57 |
| 16 | Wenn du, mein Liebster (Wolf) <i>Ger.</i>
21 ix 1934; 2RA 93 (HMV DB 2370) | 1:31 |

17	Wie lange schon (Wolf) <i>Ger.</i>	1:55
18	Du sagst mir (Wolf) <i>Ger.</i>	1:04
19	Ich liess mir sagen (Wolf) <i>Ger.</i> 2I ix 1934; 2RA 94 (HMV DB 2369)	1:24
20	Was soll der Zorn (Wolf) <i>Ger.</i>	1:21
21	Ich esse nun mein Brot (Wolf) <i>Ger.</i>	1:30
22	Wie soll ich fröhlich sein (Wolf) <i>Ger.</i> 2I ix 1934; 2RA 95 (HMV DB 2369)	1:42
23	Mühevoll komm'ich und beladen (Wolf) <i>Ger.</i> 2I ix 1934; 2RA 96 (HMV DB 2703)	4:17
24	Auf Flügeln des Gesanges (Mendelssohn) <i>Ger.</i> 28 xii 1932; BTL 2466 (previously unpublished)	3:28
25	Vergebliches Ständchen (Brahms) <i>Ger.</i> 28 xii 1932; BTL 2467 (previously unpublished)	1:39
26	TANNHÄUSER: Dich teure Halle (Wagner) <i>Ger.</i> 28 xii 1932; BTL 2468 (previously unpublished)	3:10

CD 1: tracks 1 – 4 with the Berlin Symphony conducted by Fritz Zweig; tracks 5 – 20 with the Victor Symphony Orchestra conducted by Rosario Bourdon

CD 2: tracks 1 – 7 with the Victor Symphony Orchestra conducted by Rosario Bourdon; tracks 8 – 13 with the Berlin Symphony conducted by Frieder Weissmann; tracks 14 – 23 with Coenraad V. Bos, pianist; tracks 24 – 26 with Kurt Ruhrseitz, pianist

Producer: Ward Marston

Transfers and audio restoration by Ward Marston

Typesetting and booklet design by Louise Rice

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W

hen Elisabeth Rethberg made her first recordings for HMV and later for the allied Victor company in America, she was already well established among the leading singers of her day. After her apprentice-years in Dresden, where she quickly became a favourite with audiences, critics and conductors alike, she was invited to the Metropolitan in New York where she made her début as Aida on 22 November 1922. In Germany she had recorded with the Odeon company, and in America from 1924 to 1930 she compiled a fine series of songs and arias for Brunswick (found in a complete edition on Romophone 81012). In 1929 she joined the distinguished ranks of Victor 'Red Seal' artists, and in the meantime had renewed her connection with Odeon (now Parlophone-Odeon) in Europe. She also entered the British HMV catalogue with two records in 1927 – one of Wagner, the other of Verdi – both made in Berlin.

The HMV discs were reviewed in



Rethberg as Sieglinde

Gramophone by the veteran opera critic Herman Klein. 'Oh these Elisabeths', he exclaimed (having just finished with Elisabeth Schumann in arias from *Le nozze di Figaro*), 'how clever they are! Well do they know exactly what suits them... This Elisabeth, too, is an exquisite

artist, and her *mezza voce* in *Euch Lüften* is even more wonderful than her declamation. The contrast of both in *Dich, teure Halle* is unusually marked.' About the *Aida* record, a few months earlier, he wrote: 'Again I turn to my stock of superlatives... Her voice is pure dramatic soprano, her breathing impeccable, her smooth cantilena an object-lesson, her high C in "O patria mia" a really beautiful note. Add to these things

intense expression, a wonderful diminuendo, unlimited power, dramatic colour, true artistic perception, and, thanks to realistic recording, you have a fair idea of how Elisabeth Rethberg sings Aida.'

Klein's praise was well worth having; his experience went back well into the 19th

century and his standards were high. Nevertheless he appears to have become a little forgetful, for he also writes: 'She is a "star" of the first magnitude, with an orbit that includes, I believe, the USA and ought to include this country ere many moons have passed.' (He also slipped up over the *Lohengrin* solo which was not *Euch Lüften* but *Einsam in trüben Tagen*.) Rethberg had in fact appeared at Covent Garden in 1925, and Klein had heard her there. He had then written: 'It is a lovely organ, skillfully managed, only rarely hardened by over-pressure; and her singing is marked by exemplary steadiness of tone as well as purity of style. But it was not the right voice for Aida. It sounded too light, too thin in volume, lacking the richness and power that had satisfied me in the gramophone record [on Brunswick]; in short, no more impressive to the ear than I found her infelicitous "make-up" as Amonasro's daughter to the eye. The Southern warmth of her slightly ochreous complexion was not adequately reflected either



Rethberg as Aida

in her singing or her acting – the latter more restless, more suggestive of the aspen leaf in human shape, than I care to see in the most apprehensive of Aidas.' He went on to say that her *Ritorna rincitor* was fine for 'she was thinking then of her singing'; also that she was a great deal better than the other members of a generally noisy cast. All the same, his conclusion was that 'her performance in Verdi's opera added one more proof to my growing conviction that the gramophone record, however perfect and pleasure-giving in itself, must not always be regarded as a reliable indication of the effect that the singer will produce either in the piece or the part inside an opera house.'

These are sobering but no doubt salutary words to read when setting out upon a course of listening to the records of this particularly lovely singer. Mentally, and very quickly, reviewing the all-too-brief series she made for Victor from 1929 to 1931, we hear the characteristically pure, clear, steady Rethberg

tone in Marguerite's ballad, a soundly-based technical accomplishment in the 'Jewel Song', the perfect Eva-voice in her duet with Friedrich Schorr, a sensitively shaded performance of Desdemona's solos. Her *Morrò, ma prima in grazia* from *Un ballo in maschera* is among the classics of the gramophone's vocal literature, touching in its genuine but restrained emotion. Then there is the Senta, so clean in style and finely judged in its contrasts; the *L'amerò* with its unspoilt legato that is nevertheless gracefully expressive; the haunting sincerity of the *Boccaccio*, the grand style and panache of the *Fledermaus*. In the trios with Gigli and Pinza, too much is at a straight forte (Gigli sets the right level here), but I recall the thrill, in a performance of Tom Murphy's play *The Gigli Concert*, of hearing Rethberg's voice suddenly arising out of the dark in the first phrases from the *Attila* record, a glorious sound, and (one realised afresh) utterly personal and distinctive. Finally, of course, there are the *Aida* records,



Lauri-Volpi as Radames

the famous sequence from the 'Nile Scene', about which Lauri-Volpi claimed that he had to retreat to a great distance from the microphone so as not to overwhelm the others. Not much evidence of that comes to the ears of the unsuspecting listener, while, at the end, quite as much as the tenor's ringing high notes, it is the quiet unflawed beauty of Rethberg's *Là tra foreste vergini* that stays in the mind.

Though we should keep Klein's words in view, and indeed will revert to them later, it must be said that during this period there is no evident disparity between the records and the facts of Rethberg's career. She was probably then at the peak of her fame and form, recognised widely as one of the most admired of living singers. She returned to Europe fairly frequently (in 1928, for example, to sing the title rôle in the world première of Strauss's *Die Ägyptische Helena* at Dresden), but she was now firmly centred on the Metropolitan and other leading opera houses in the United States. There she sang in

a wide variety of rôles, crossing, as few Met 'stars' did at the time, the divide between German and Italian opera, with special success in *Lohengrin* and *Die Walküre* on one hand, *Il trovatore* and, of course, *Aida* on the other. Also in 1928, the Guild of Vocal Teachers of America voted hers the most perfect voice, and Toscanini was quoted as comparing the perfection of her singing with that of a finely played Stradivarius.

The press reviews of this period also make interesting reading. Very largely they tell the same story, of fine singing and indifferent acting. 'Almost perfect vocalisation which, however, overshadows every other interest she has in opera' was the comment on her performance in *Un ballo in maschera* at Ravinia in 1928. About her *Aida* there the following year, G. D. Gunn in the *Chicago Herald* found her 'unsurpassable as to beauty of tone, depth of musical feeling, taste, poise and authority'. After *Il trovatore* in 1930, another of the Chicago critics, Albert Goldberg, wrote: 'The

tone was of its invariable purity, and her mastery of the snares and pitfalls of the rôle should have been a lesson to every singer who heard her.' In the same rôle one year later she was complimented by Eugene Stinson on other and less familiar grounds: 'Miss Rethberg brought unwonted expressiveness into her singing, and in the last act was in a way unrecognisable, so freely did her voice colour itself to the import of her text.'



Rethberg as Desdemona

A warning note came to be struck repeatedly when she added Rachel in *La Juive* to her repertoire. W. J. Henderson, recalling that the part was written for the powerful dramatic soprano Marie Cornélie Falcon, commented that 'Rethberg

seemed as yet to be a falconet.' Allowing that 'whatever she does, she is always an artist', he warned that 'the effort to conquer the strenuous utterances...may not benefit her singularly captivating voice'. Oscar Thompson summed it up very simply: 'Rachel is dramatic, Rethberg is lyric.' By 1932 Pitts Sanborn in

the *New York World* observed: 'Mme Rethberg provided a conventional Rachel, who often sang well but often shrieked.' It must have been the first time such a word could have been used to describe the singing of Elisabeth Rethberg.

This was a portent, for during the 1930s her career, which should have been much more durable, began to go awry. The process may date back further. A première that conferred considerable prestige was that of Respighi's *La campana sommersa* in 1928, the composer himself attending, and performances being arranged for Rethberg and Martinelli in Rome the following spring. The Italian critics were indeed full of praise – and some surprise, finding her not at all Germanic. But on the whole the Americans found it hard to take. The character of Rautendelein is described as 'an elfinish being who has scarcely reached maidenhood'. In the person of Rethberg she had 'at any rate a plump and healthy look' and executed 'a series of pirouettes graceful at least in intention'. 'At times lyric, at times coloratura' was how the vocal aspect of the part appeared. Rethberg was, in fact, becoming the victim of her own versatility. One of her earliest successes at Dresden had been as

Konstanze in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, and this too is a Janus-faced rôle for the voice, at times coloratura, at times dramatic. Rethberg could do all these things, for she was a thoroughly well-trained singer with an ample voice that was also finely flexible. But as Oscar Thompson wrote: 'Rethberg is lyric.'

As the years went by, singing big rôles in the big house, she worked her voice uncomfortably hard. In the later 1930s, when she herself was only in her mid-forties, after the main run of studio recordings had ended, 'pirate' recordings from the stage of the Met and other houses show an unmistakably authoritative stylist, and in the quieter singing a beauty still identifiable with that of her prime. But when pressed, a reckless, almost aggressive tone came into play; the absolute steadiness of earlier days is lost, and even the intonation is compromised. Irving Kolodin, in his history of the Metropolitan, described as the *reductio ad absurdum* of her career the attempt she made, in two performances in 1942, upon the *Siegfried* Brünnhilde. But really the trouble had started all those years ago when Aida became her principal rôle – as Herman Klein had warned.

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Elisabeth Rethberg's electrical recordings (1927-34)

This 2-CD set contains Elisabeth Rethberg's complete electrical recordings made between 1927-34 for HMV, Parlophone, Victor and the Bell Telephone Laboratories. While the material in this collection is grouped by record company, for the sake of musical cohesiveness, I have presented Rethberg's Victor recordings out of chronological sequence. This allows the Nile scene from Act 3 of *Aida* (which follows the HMV-Electrola recording of *O patria mia*) to be presented in its entirety rather than as separate excerpts. Similarly, I have grouped the two excerpts from *Otello* and *Ballo* together irrespective of their recording dates.

The 1927 HMV recordings were recorded in a large hall resulting in much sonic presence. For the transfers of this material I have used Victor pressings from the 1930s which have less surface noise than those originally made by HMV-Electrola. The 1930 and 1933 Parlophone-Odeon recordings were recorded in a small studio, and are severely lacking in bass frequencies. (Unfortunately, there is also some pitch instability in the aria from *Figaro*.) The six Parlophone recordings were also issued by American Columbia whose generally superior pressings have been used for the transfers.

The three selections at the end of this set were originally made as an equipment test for the Bell Telephone Laboratories. During the 1920s Bell Labs had developed the electrical recording process, which was licensed to record companies by Western Electric. In the 1930s Bell Labs experimented with higher quality amplifiers and microphones, and improved their recording methods. In order to publicise their technical advances, they invited celebrities to make records intended for demonstration purposes only. Elisabeth Rethberg recorded three separate works for Bell Labs. These discs were made at 33 rpm and employed the 'Hill and Dale' (or vertical) cutting system. In order to retain as much high frequency information as possible, the masters were gold plated. These recordings evince a marvellous open reproduction of Rethberg's voice, but are, unfortunately, also marred by distortion. Despite these defects, they represent an important addition to the recorded legacy of the great Rethberg.

Ward Marston



Elisabeth Rethberg

the HMV, Parlophone and Victor recordings (1927~34)

CD I

- 1 Dich teure Halle (Wagner)
- 2 Einsam in trüben Tagen (Wagner)
- 3 Ritorna vincitor (Verdi)
- 4 O patria mia (Verdi)
- 5 Ciel! mio padre! (Verdi)
- 6 Su, dunque! sorgete egizie coorti! (Verdi)
- 7 Pur ti riveggo (Verdi)
- 8 Là tra foreste vergini (Verdi)
- 9 Ah, no! fuggiamo! (Verdi)
- 10 Ma, dimmi (Verdi)
- 11 L'amerò sarò costante (Mozart)
- 12 Batti, batti (Mozart)
- 13 Il était un roi de Thulé (Gounod)
- 14 Je ris de me voir si belle (Gounod)
- 15 Ma dall'arido stelo (Verdi)
- 16 Morrò, ma prima in grazia (Verdi)
- 17 Piangea cantando nell'erma landa (Verdi)
- 18 Ave Maria (Verdi)
- 19 Qual voluttà trascorrere (Verdi)
- 20 Qual voluttà trascorrere (Verdi) – *alternative take*

CD 2

- 1 Te sol quest'amina (Verdi)
- 2 Te sol quest'amina (Verdi) – *alternative take*

- 3 Sieh, Ev'chen (Wagner)
- 4 Hat man mit dem Schuhwerk (Wagner)
- 5 Johohoe! Traft ihr das Schiff (Wagner)
- 6 Hab'ich nur deine Liebe (von Suppé)
- 7 Klänge der Heimat (Strauss II)
- 8 Heil'ge Quelle (Mozart)
- 9 So elend und so treu (Strauss II)
- 10 Ich sprach, dass ich furchtlos mich fühle (Bizet)
- 11 Leb'wohl, freundlich Gestade (Meyerbeer)
- 12 Eines Tages sehen wir (Puccini)
- 13 Voi lo sapete (Mascagni)
- 14 Wohl kenn'ich Euren Stand (Wolf)
- 15 Man sagt mir (Wolf)
- 16 Wenn du, mein Liebster (Wolf)
- 17 Wie lange schon (Wolf)
- 18 Du sagst mir (Wolf)
- 19 Ich liess mir sagen (Wolf)
- 20 Was soll der Zorn (Wolf)
- 21 Ich esse nun mein Brot (Wolf)
- 22 Wie soll ich fröhlich sein (Wolf)
- 23 Mühevoll komm'ich und beladen (Wolf)
- 24 Auf Flügeln des Gesanges (Mendelssohn)
- 25 Vergebliches Ständchen (Brahms)
- 26 Dich teure Halle (Wagner)

Elisabeth Rethberg

Elisabeth Rethberg (1894-1976) was one of the most important lyric-dramatic sopranos of the century. Noted especially for her interpretations of Mozart, Verdi and Wagner, she has been described by John Steane as 'the singer's singer, setting a standard of pure vocal mastery to which all but a few can only approximate'. Following seven seasons with the Dresden Court Opera, Rethberg joined New York Metropolitan Opera in 1922, where she remained until her retirement from the stage in 1942. This 2-CD set features her complete HMV, Parlophone and Victor recordings made between 1927-34. In addition to arias from operas by Mozart, Bizet, Gounod, Verdi (including the Nile scene from *Aida* with Giacomo Lauri-Volpi as Radames), Puccini and Wagner, this set includes her complete Lieder recordings for the Hugo Wolf Society, and three previously unpublished items made for the Bell Laboratories in 1934.

Total timing: 2 hrs 35 mins

Transfers and audio restoration by Ward Marston

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81014-2 A

Elisabeth Rethberg
the complete HMV, Parlophone and
Victor recordings (1927~34)

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phone

ADD

COMPACT
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CD I

(programme details in accompanying booklet)

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81014-2 B

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